Pacific Islands Forum 2025: Navigating Great-Power Rivalry

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Critical Questions by **John Augé** and **Kathryn Paik**
Published September 16, 2025

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From September 8 to 12, leaders from across the Pacific Islands region gathered in Honiara, Solomon Islands, for the 54th Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting (PIFLM). This annual gathering convenes leaders from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)'s 18 members to address national and regional priorities. This year marked the first time the Solomon Islands hosted the meeting since switching diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019. Notably, 21 dialogue partners, including the United States and China, and development partner Taiwan, were excluded from attending, likely as a compromise in response to China's pressure to disinvite Taiwan. These *Critical Questions* examine this year's PIFLM, the outcomes of the meeting, why dialogue partners were excluded, and the implications of these developments for the region's future.

Q1: What were the outcomes of this year's PIFLM?

A1: This year's forum addressed a broad set of regional issues and achieved several tangible outcomes. Leaders discussed a variety of issues, including economic development, climate change, and technology and connectivity, among others.

As expected, the leaders agreed to the Ocean of Peace Declaration, an initiative Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka first introduced at the 52nd PIFLM in Rarotonga, Cook Islands, in 2023. The declaration confirms the region's "commitment to uphold peace, security and cooperation," with Solomon Islands Prime Minister Jeremiah Manele

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noting that, "The Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration is a call for the Pacific to control its destiny, to place development at the center of our agenda for peace and free our people from want, from fear, and to live in dignity." The signing of the Ocean of Peace Declaration against a backdrop of intensifying great-power competition in the Pacific underscores the forum's determination to assert regional sovereignty in a moment when external powers are increasingly vying for influence through aid, security partnerships, and diplomatic engagement. Together with the forum's endorsement of Australia's bid to host COP 31, this demonstrates how the PIF is asserting itself in a unified way on the global stage, particularly on climate issues.

Pacific leaders also signed a treaty to officially establish the Pacific Resilience Facility (PRF), which will be the region's first financial institution established to support critical regional development projects. As a Pacific-owned and led initiative, the PRF will serve to provide funding for regional priorities and address what is described as "the issue of too little, too slow, too complicated challenges of accessing global climate financing." It has raised $159 million toward an initial goal of $500 million, with a longer-term target of $1.5 billion. The Pacific is the world's most aid-dependent region, receiving $3 billion in foreign assistance in 2022 alone. The PRF represents a shift toward a more self-reliant, regionally controlled funding model, addressing the Pacific's extreme vulnerability to climate-related disasters and the shortcomings of international climate funds.

Leaders agreed to continue progress on the review of regional architecture, a high-level review designed to reevaluate the status of and decide how the region will engage with external partners. However, the leaders stopped short of formally endorsing the review, possibly because a footnote in the final communiqué stated, "The Republic of Nauru disassociates itself from the Review of the Regional Architecture section in its entirety."

Most notably, Pacific leaders expressed support for Taiwan's inclusion in the annual summit, with PIF Secretary-General Baron Waqa reaffirming the original 1992 decision by stating, "Based on the Leaders' decision, including the retreat as well. . . . The 1992 decision is still there." This outcome represents a welcome surprise for Taiwan and supporters of Taiwan's engagement in the Pacific, especially coming out of a summit that was hosted by the Solomon Islands, one of China's strongest allies in the region. It signals that even countries with close ties to Beijing are willing to uphold regional norms—or at least not willing to go completely counter to the rest of the PIF.

Q2: What role do PIF dialogue partners play in the forum, and why were they excluded this year?

A2: The PIF, which includes 16 Pacific Islands plus New Zealand and Australia, first welcomed the United States, Canada, France, Japan, and the United Kingdom as dialogue partners in 1989. Since then, the number has grown to 21 dialogue partners, including China, with Singapore joining in 2021. While not an official dialogue partner, Taiwan became a PIF development partner in 1992, and since then, Taiwan has been invited, along with dialogue partners, to attend sideline meetings at the annual PIFLM.

As China's willingness and capacity to expand its influence into the Pacific have accelerated over the past decade, so too has its pressure on Taiwan's Pacific allies. Since 2019, the number of Pacific countries that recognize Taiwan has halved—with Solomon Islands and Kiribati switching recognition in 2019 and Nauru in 2024. At the 2024 PIFLM in Tonga, Beijing and the Solomon Islands expressed displeasure over Taiwan's status and inclusion in the final communique—a reference that was later revised to exclude any mention of Taiwan as a development partner. This discord raised concerns that the 2025 summit in Honiara would be particularly challenging, prompting greater attention by Taiwan and its friends across the region through the first half of 2025.

In June 2025, it was revealed that officials from Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs were denied visas to enter the Solomon Islands. Taiwan maintains diplomatic relations with three countries in the Pacific: Tuvalu; the Republic of the Marshall Islands; and Palau, which advocated for Taiwan's fair participation in this year's meeting. Discontent was not isolated to Taiwan's diplomatic allies. In early August, then Samoan Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mataʻafa noted her country might boycott the meeting if Taiwan was not invited. On August 6, Manele notified the nation's parliament that dialogue partners, including the United States, China, and development partner Taiwan, would not be invited to this year's PIFLM, citing an ongoing PIF review of regional architecture. However, several regional officials suggested that Manele faced pressure from Beijing to limit Taiwan's participation and made this decision as a compromise.

On August 14, the region's foreign ministers confirmed that dialogue partners would not be invited to the meeting. New Zealand's Minister of Foreign Affairs Winston Peters voiced a strong critique of what many saw as the Solomon Islands' thinly veiled excuse to appease Beijing:

> The blame lies squarely with the decision by the Solomon Islands government, who knew that over the years and decades, we've invited dialogue partners to come along because it expands our capacity, and . . . for the first time . . . they've said they don't want to invite anyone.

Yet despite multiple threats to withdraw, representatives from all member countries attended the summit.

Q3: Was this a win for China?

A3: The decision to exclude all dialogue partners was viewed by some to be the best possible solution, and one that would "de-escalate a geopolitically charged situation." Given Beijing's strong influence on the Solomon Islands, it is unlikely that other partners, even Australia, could have ensured Taiwan's inclusion. Selective exclusion of Taiwan would likely have heightened regional tensions and may have risked member states boycotting the meeting or even the possibility of broader PIF fragmentation. A comprehensive exclusion of all partners, while imperfect, mitigated these risks by preventing the perception of bias while simultaneously limiting China's ability to capitalize on Taiwan's absence.

However, this approach was not without costs. Dialogue partners provide critical development assistance, climate finance, and technical expertise, and their exclusion raised questions regarding the PIF's ability to balance internal cohesion with external engagement. For China, the decision was a setback: Its representatives were barred alongside those of Taipei, constraining Beijing's efforts to leverage the Forum as a platform for projecting influence. However, China, unlike Taiwan, has an embassy and diplomats already on the ground in Honiara, and it continued to strengthen its position in the Solomon Islands during the summit, deploying a significant number of representatives and utilizing its embassy's social media presence to highlight infrastructure and telecommunications initiatives. In fact, in the week before the summit, China launched a community policing initiative in the Solomon Islands that includes fingerprint collection and household registration cards.

Q4: What do all of these developments mean for the future of the region—and for the PIF?

A4: While the exclusion of dialogue partners in this year's forum meeting appears to have avoided a PIF crisis in the near term, the core tensions that great power competition brings to the region remain unresolved. Given China's strategic ambitions in the Pacific

and its laser focus on Taiwan as a core national interest, it is likely that Beijing will sustain, if not increase, its pressure campaign in the Pacific to diplomatically isolate Taiwan. The leaders' expression of support for the 1992 decision will help alleviate some of this pressure by providing precedent for neutral or pro-Taiwan countries to point to. Until the region finalizes its review of regional architecture, however, and conclusively sets expectations for partner attendance in future meetings, this issue will continue to rear its head well beyond Palau's hosting of the PIFLM in 2026.

On a broader level, this year's dialogue partner drama highlights the extent to which great power competition is causing unwelcome strife within the Pacific—even as some countries are able to leverage increased partner focus to their benefit. Regional tensions rose sharply with debate over Taiwan and the exclusion of dialogue partners from this year's summit. A fracturing of the PIF is not unprecedented. In 2021, all five Micronesian countries (Palau, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, and Nauru) threatened to withdraw from the PIF after a Polynesian candidate was selected as secretary-general, breaking the unwritten rule that the position rotates among the three subregions of the Pacific. While the Micronesian crisis was eventually averted, other issues, such as disagreements on deep-sea mining, could also drive a wedge between members in the future.

When Pacific nations opt out of key forums, it runs counter to the PIF's purpose, which seeks to bring the region together rather than divide it, and to provide a platform through which the region can engage larger partners as a united group. Recurring disputes over Taiwan's participation risk deepening divisions among Pacific Island countries themselves, forcing them to navigate the difficult balance between their diplomatic partnerships and the region's collective cohesion. Looking ahead, Palau will host the PIFLM in 2026. Its president, Surrangel Whipps Jr., has emphasized, "Palau remains committed to working closely with Taiwan to ensure a successful event, and that they will continue to speak up for Taiwan's indispensable contributions as we stand together against any efforts to silence or isolate democratic partners."

Uncertainty remains over how the region will address increasing great power interest. On one hand, the region gains increased attention, resources, and programming; on the other, it faces heightened tensions and policy strife, as external powers pursue strategic objectives. With China exerting growing pressure and influence, such divides are likely to deepen, leaving Pacific Island countries to carefully navigate between opportunity and vulnerability.

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